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The Poets' Dante: Twentieth-Century Responses



Synopsis

Essays on the most celebrated Italian poet by eminent poets of the twentieth century"Perhaps confessions by poets, of what Dante has meant to them, may even contribute something to the appreciation of Dante himself."-T. S. Eliot The great fourteenth-century poet has been an unequalled influence on many writers in the twentieth century, whose "confessions" may well foster a deeper appreciation of Dante. Previously published essays by some of this century's most renowned poets-Pound, Eliot, Mandelstam, Robert Fitzgerald, Borges, Merrill, Montale, Lowell, Duncan, Auden, Yeats, Charles Williams, Nemerov, Heaney-join new essays commissioned by the editors. Contemporary poets Mary Campbell, W. S. Di Piero, J. D. McClatchy, W. S. Merwin, Robert Pinsky, Rosanna Warren, Alan Williamson, and Charles Wright reflect on Dante as well as on their own complex (and often contentious) relationship to his legacy. Their engagement with his work offers a fresh perspective on the *Commedia* and its author that more academic writing does not provide. As the editors write, a new consideration of Dante "should generate insights not only about his work but also about poetry written in our own language and time.

Book Information

Paperback: 432 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1st edition (April 3, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374528403

ISBN-13: 978-0374528409

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

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Customer Reviews

This 2001 anthology presents twentieth-century reactions by leading poets to Dante. The first half collects previously published essays. Ezra Pound proves his skill at hearing poetry, attending to Dante's impact as he packs his verse or lets it loose in the lines of the *Commedia*. James Merrill compares the thrust forward of the line invented by Dante to a scull propelled in the water by oars.

Osip Mandelstam, in a long entry somewhat as dadaist as parts of the poem itself (in his estimation) in his shape-shifting, jarring, experimentally conceived, but engaging analysis, merges analogies to orchestral arrangements into idiosyncratic, unpredictable "conversations" about Dante. Seeing he had to write this under Soviet scrutiny may explain its unpredictable style. Like Pound, the Russian wants us to listen to cantos as they waltz. Jorge Luis Borges fondly recalls how he learned his limited Italian from its expansive practitioner, Dante. Robert Fitzgerald approves Lawrence Binyon's valiant adaptation of an archaic, antiquated medieval phrasing which also tries to reproduce an echo of the effect of the terza rima itself, a difficult feat in English, as word order locks down in our language what had greater liberty when Dante manipulated and invented so much of his own Tuscan vernacular. As T.S. Eliot reminds us, the breath is crucial, and in the middle of the line, patterns in the syntax appear which defy imitation in our vernacular, for Dante "thought in terza rima." Packed energy accelerates this pace. Inevitably, renderings of it in English cannot repeat its diversions. Nor can it duplicate its compression into phrases which dart in and out as inversions. Perhaps like no other, the original poem propels you.

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